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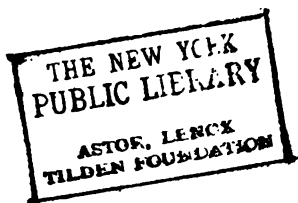
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**MEMOIR OF ISOBEL BURNS**

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(MRS. BEGG)

A MEMOIR

BY

HER GRANDSON



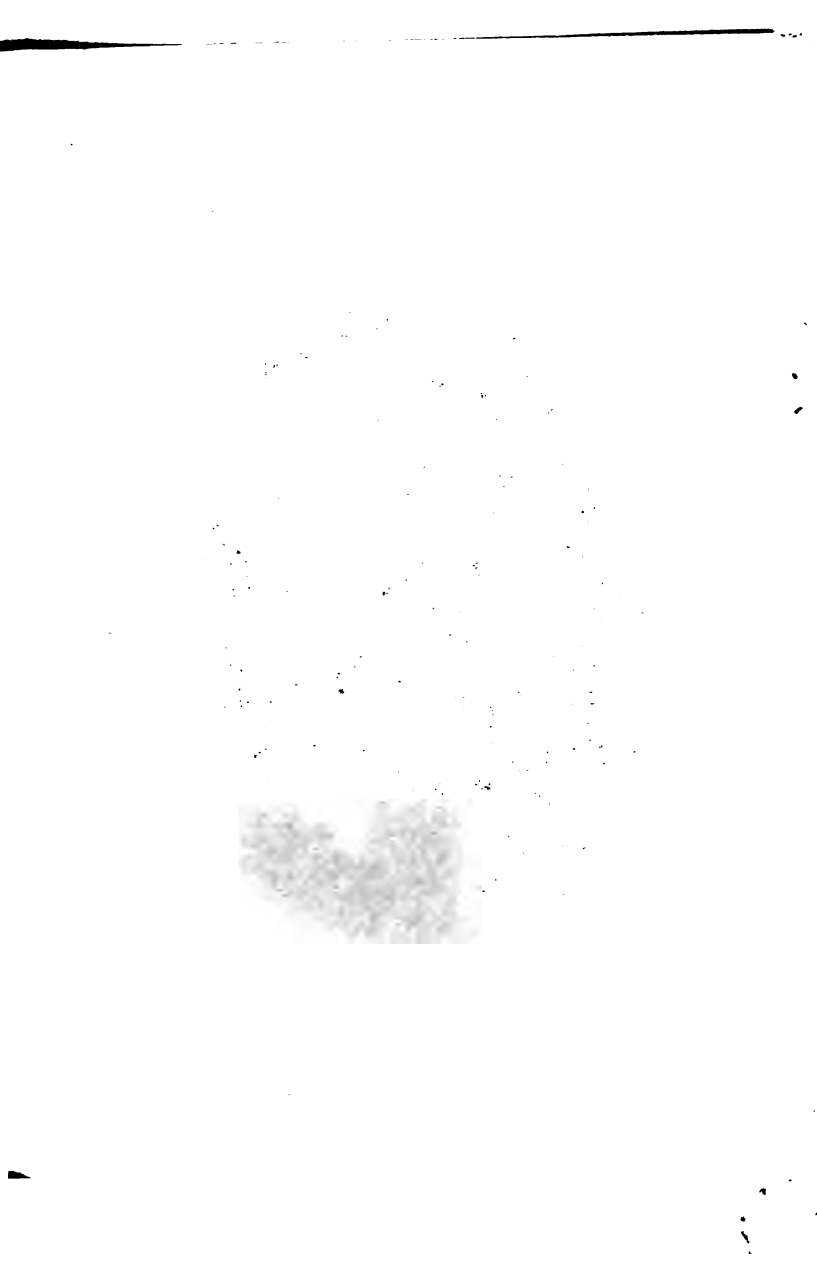
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# ISOBEL BURNS

(MRS. BEGG)

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A MEMOIR

BY

HER GRANDSON

Robert Burns Begg  
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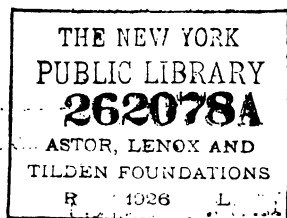
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Publisher to Her Majesty the Queen

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TO

*The Memory*

OF

MY FATHER

(ROBERT BURNS BEGG, SCHOOLMASTER OF THE  
PARISH OF KINROSS)

THIS

MEMOIR OF HIS MOTHER

IS

REVERENTLY INSCRIBED



## PREFACE.

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*(As in the Original Limited Edition.)*

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IN thus providing for the perusal of the relatives of Burns the following Memoir of his youngest sister, I feel that little is required of me in the shape of a preface, and still less in the shape of an apology. To those who were privileged to know her, the many admirable traits of her character must have become a deeply pleasing remembrance, while to those who were not so privileged, they can scarcely fail to prove an equally pleasing revelation.

I have left her life's story to speak for itself, without the slightest attempt on my part in the way either of embellishment or of modification, and if in this little volume I have in any measure succeeded in conveying a just conception of her, and of her large-hearted, loving nature, I shall feel that my effort has not been altogether "love's labour lost."

R. B. B.

KINROSS,

25th January, 1891.



# MEMOIR OF ISOBEL BURNS

(MRS. BEGG).



THE subject of the following brief

Memoir presents in the incidents of her chequered life, as well as in the traits of her disposition and character, a personality sufficiently noteworthy to justify the hope that these pages may not be without interest to the many admirers of the genius and personality of her distinguished brother, Robert Burns. Of Mrs. Begg's life's experience it has been both well and justly remarked that "it has all the charm

which a tale of humble and honourable independence can possess," while of her mental characteristics it may with equal truth be said that they were eminently fitted to adorn almost any sphere of society.

In her picturesque cottage on the banks of the Doon, she was for the last sixteen years of her existence regarded with much public interest and veneration, simply because she was the youngest sister of Burns, and the last survivor of that domestic group, which, alike within "the auld clay biggin'" at Ayr and in the farm homesteads of Mount Oliphant and Lochlea, has for more than a century concentrated so much of the kindly scrutiny of the

Scottish people. Independently, however, of the lustre shed around her by her brother's fame, Mrs. Begg possessed a personal claim to special regard, which none of the many who were privileged to come in contact with her found it possible to ignore. To them her natural dignity and refinement, her acute and vigorous intellect, and her cultivated taste, especially in literary matters, never failed to convey an interesting and lasting impression. This is gracefully and truthfully referred to in the following extract from a tribute to her memory, which appeared in the public press on the occasion of her death towards the close of the year 1858 :—

“At her house she received visitors of all grades and from all parts, and with all she was perfectly at her ease. Hundreds upon hundreds from every corner of the United Kingdom and from the Continent and America came every year to the little cottage at Belleisle to see the sister of the poet, and none went away without a higher respect for him and all belonging to him. They saw in her and in her two daughters very much of what they could well fancy the poet in his happier hours would have—frank openness, tempered with that dignified self-respect which repelled and checked vulgarity, no matter whether it assumed the air of patronising self-importance or of rude impertinence. Hers was the natural manner which art cannot communicate, and which is beyond convention. Mrs. Begg was quite a lady without attempting it, just because she was every inch a woman ; and the propriety of carriage, which in the case of her brother astonished the refined circles of Edinburgh three-quarters of a century ago, was not less remarkable in her.”

Mrs. Begg's life was a humble one, and with the exception of its closing

sixteen years, which were passed in well-earned peace and comfort, it was a struggling one as well. Throughout the greater part of its lengthened duration of fourscore and six years, her every aspiration and thought was fettered by the sordid details of a life of privation and trial. Her education, too, was exceedingly meagre, for with the exception of the intellectual culture imparted to her by her father and her brother Robert, and a brief period of systematic tuition under John Wilson, schoolmaster of Tarbolton, immortalised by Burns as "Dr. Hornbook," her mental development, like the mental development of the other members of her family, was entirely self-acquired.

In spite of this serious disadvantage, she seems in her youth to have attained to remarkable discrimination of thought and considerable cultivation of intellect ; and in her more mature years she displayed traits of elevated sentiment, and of native force and felicity of expression, which may almost be regarded as akin to that with which her poet brother was so prodigally endowed. This formed a strongly-marked feature, not in her conversation alone, but also, and more especially, in her epistolary correspondence ; and keeping in view the limited culture of the period, it is scarce possible to peruse the few extracts from her letters which are embodied in these pages without being

forcibly struck by her peculiar natural gift as a letter-writer. In this respect, as well as in the unwavering independence of spirit and undaunted energy which she displayed, her life and character form a not uninteresting psychological study, illustrating as it does the principle of heredity, and the fact that the brilliant ray of genius transmitted through old William Burness and his helpmate Agnes Brown, was not altogether absorbed by their illustrious first-born, but was to a certain extent reflected even in the very youngest of their numerous offspring.

Nor was Mrs. Begg the only member of the family, in addition to the poet, who was gifted with this fertility of

fancy combined with remarkable felicity of expression. It seems indeed to have been more or less common to the whole of William Burness's children, for we find the poet himself, rather a critical judge, complimenting his youngest brother William very highly on his ability as a letter-writer. Writing to William in March 1789, the poet says:—

“I am indebted to you for one of the best letters that has been written by any mechanic lad in Nithsdale or Annandale or any dale on either side of the Border this twelvemonth.”

We also know from the existing biographies of the poet that his brother Gilbert was similarly gifted, and the following extracts from a letter



addressed to Mrs. Begg by Agnes Burns, the eldest daughter of the family, show that Agnes likewise participated in this family trait. Agnes's letter is dated 30th January, with the year illegible, but from ascertained facts it falls to be assigned to one or other of the opening years of the present century :—

“DEAR SISTER,—I received yours of the 18th, which affected me very much. I was indeed accusing you of neglect; but, short-sighted creatures as we are, I did not suspect the cause nor ever once thought (amid all this season of wishing, which always brings to my mind my absent friends) that you were suffering so much from pain and depression of spirits; but I am happy to see you make such good use of affliction. The mind that looks up to heaven through the mist of affliction can never want consolation.

“For friend or happy life, who looks not higher,  
Of neither will he find the shadow here.

“I have been trying to recollect the verses  
you mentioned, but I do not remember them all ;  
but here is what I have :—

“Sick of this world and all its joy,  
My soul in pining sadness mourns ;  
Dark scenes of woe my thoughts employ,  
The past and present in their turns.

“I see, I feel vain life's a dream,  
And never will be cheated more ;  
Vain hopes, fond wishes, I disclaim,  
And fly what I pursued before.

“Fool that I was to dream of peace  
In such a stormy land as this !—  
To think to hold in firm embrace  
The fleeting, airy shade of bliss.

“The blasts that meet us in the way—  
The ills by which our life's oppressed—  
The clouds that hang upon our day  
Declare that this is not our rest.

“How kindly are they sent by heaven :  
Misfortunes serve to make us wise.  
By joy misled, by folly driven,  
How many lose the heavenly prize !

“Far better to be plagued each morn  
Than slain by blandishments of sense :  
Oh ! rather hedge my way with thorn  
And guard my steps with rugged fence.

“But oh ! what fickle hearts we have—  
We rush into the world again ;  
We never rest but in the grave,  
But court new vanity—new pain.

“While here below we shift and turn—  
The sport of every gale that blows ;  
Now soar, now sink, now joy, now mourn :  
A puff exalts—a puff o’erthrows.

“Oh happy they who ever dwell  
Beyond mortality’s dull scene,  
Where radiant rays of light dispel  
This cloud of sorrow and of pain.

“ . . . If you be writing to Morham, send them my best wishes, although they seem to have forgot me. I hope you will write me soon. Give my best wishes to my mother ; and with wishing you all many happy years, I shall conclude.—Your affectionate sister,

“ AGNES BURNS.”

The family gift of literary expression above referred to has not passed unnoticed by the numerous biographers of the poet. Dr. Chambers, in his edition of Burns's Life and Works has the following allusion to the subject. In speaking of the family of William Burness he says :—

“It was not alone with the wondrous elder-born that literary feeling resided. Agnes, as she sat with her two sisters, Anabella and Isabella, milking the cows, would delight them by reciting the poetry with which her mind was stored—as

the ballad of 'Sir James the Ross,' 'The Flowers of the Forest,' or the second version of the 145th Psalm in the Scottish translation ; while Gilbert was nearly as noted as Robert for his studies in English literature, limited as these were."

This community of taste was no doubt well fostered in the minds of William Burness' children by old "Betty Davidson," a dependant of their father's, who resided in the family, and to whom the poet in his Autobiography acknowledges his indebtedness,—her inexhaustible collection of tales and songs, concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, etc., having tended to cultivate in his mind the latent seeds of poesy.

The household of the poet's father, William Burness, even although we

wholly eliminate from the family group its great central feature and attraction—Burns himself—forms a deeply interesting and characteristic study of Scottish domestic life during the last century. The sterling worth, unswerving integrity, and plodding, indomitable perseverance of the patriarchal father—the unquestioning allegiance of his prudent and gentle helpmate, Agnes Brown, and the loyalty, reverence, and devotion of the children, present a type of Scottish family community of interest which, alas!—like many of the best of our national characteristics—is now in some measure becoming a mere relic of the past. Alike at Mount Oliphant and Lochlea, this “family de-

votion" is found in full and active existence, toiling on from day to day in an unquestioning spirit of loyalty and self-abnegation, each member of the household feeling the family tie only becoming closer and more firmly knit amid the calamity and disaster which enshrouded them all in common.

The privation and struggle which had to be endured within the "auld clay biggin'" at Ayr, the children of William Burness could know little of; for in 1766, when the family removed thence to Mount Oliphant, Robert, the eldest son, was barely seven years of age. He and his younger brother Gilbert, and his two younger sisters, Agnes and Anabella, were therefore

still in that happily inconsiderate stage of their existence when worldly cares are unknown and undreamed of. When, however, the unprofitableness of Mount Oliphant compelled a second migration, eleven years afterwards, to the farm of Lochlea, in the parish of Tarbolton, the cares and trials of life must have become painfully real to at least the elder children of the household. The poet himself, then in his eighteenth year, graphically characterises his life at this period as "the cheerless gloom of a hermit, with the unceasing moil of a galley slave." By this time his brother Gilbert was seventeen years of age, and his sister Agnes fifteen; while the younger children consisted of Anabella,



aged thirteen ; William, ten ; John, eight ; and Isobel—the subject of this Memoir—six.

Such was the household which entered into possession of Lochlea in 1777 ; and for several years William Burness, with the assistance of his gentle but practical and energetic wife and their devoted children, bravely toiled on there, amid many difficulties and disadvantages.

The poet, in his Autobiography, after stating that the farm of Lochlea was larger than that of Mount Oliphant, goes on to say :—

“The nature of the bargain was such as to throw a little ready money in my father’s hand at the commencement ; otherwise, the affair

would have been impracticable. For four years we lived comfortably here ; but a lawsuit between him and his landlord, commencing after three years' tossing and whirling in the vortex of litigation, my father was just saved from absorption in a jail by a phthisical consumption, which, after two years' promises, kindly stepped in, and snatched him away to 'where the wicked cease from troubling and where the weary are at rest.'"

The poet's younger brother Gilbert, in more practical but much less graphic form, tells us that Lochlea extended to 130 acres, and that the rent was twenty shillings an acre ; and he adds :—

"No writing had ever been made out of the conditions of the lease ; a misunderstanding took place respecting them. The subjects in dispute were submitted to arbitration, and the decision involved my father's affairs in ruin. He lived to know the decision, but not to see any execution in consequence of it."

Graphic sketches of the family life at Lochlea are to be found scattered over the pages of the various editions of the poet's Life and Works ; and not the least interesting of these is furnished by the following characteristic letter, written by William Burness himself within three years of his death, and addressed to his nephew, James Burness, Montrose. The letter forms part of the interesting collection of Burns's relics, now preserved within the Burns's Monument in Edinburgh :—

“DEAR NEPHEW,—I received your affectionate letter by the bearer, who came five miles with it to my house. I received it with the same warmth you wrote it, and I am extremely glad you express yourself with so warm regard for your parents and friends. I wish you much

joy in your wife and child. I would have been glad had you sent me their names, with the name of your brother-in-law.

"I have a family of four sons and three daughters ; two of my sons and two of my daughters are men and women, and all with me in the farm way. I have the happiness to hope they are virtuously inclined. My youngest daughter is ten years of age. My eldest son is named Robert ; my second, Gilbert ; the third, John ; the fourth, William. My eldest daughter is named Agnes ; the second, Annabella ; the third, Isobel.

"My brother lives at Stewarton, by Kilmar-nock. He has two sons and one daughter—named John, William, and Fanny. Their circumstances are very indifferent.

"I shall be happy to hear from you when it is convenient, when I shall write to you from time to time. Please give my respects to your brother and sister in the kindest manner, and to your wife, which will greatly oblige your affectionate uncle,

"WILLIAM BURNES.

"LOCHLEA, 14th April, 1781."

Dr. Chambers, in his interesting biography of the poet, affords us a still more realistic view of the family life at Lochlea. He says :—

“It was a time of comparative comfort for the Burness family, although marked not less than any other by extreme application to labour. The family was a remarkable one in the district. They kept more by themselves than is common in their class. Their superior intelligence and refinement, and a certain air of self-respect which they bore amidst all the common drudgeries of their situation, caused them to be looked upon as people of a superior sort. Country neighbours who happened to enter their family room at the dinner hour were surprised to find them all—father, brothers, and sisters—sitting with a book in one hand, while they used their spoons with the other.”

Of the sterling merits, the head of the household, William Burness, alike

as a man and as a husband and father, little need here be said. These have been so often and so forcibly depicted by the poet's numerous biographers, that his character has already become almost typical in its sturdy rigidity of principle and conscientious devotion to duty. Isobel's reverence for and devotion to the memory of her father formed a prominent and striking characteristic of her "mental tone." Proud as she was of her illustrious brother, and fondly as she clung to her every recollection of him, she was still prouder of, and clung still more fondly and tenderly to her memories of her father. Him she regarded as a far higher object of admiration, and her favourite

delineation of him was to point to him as the veritable original of "the saint, the father, and the husband," so reverently depicted by her brother in his "Cottar's Saturday Night."

Nor can it be doubted that William Burness was a man of rare and exceptional merit. The *Manual of Religious Belief*, which he compiled for the instruction of his children, and which occupies a prominent place in the more recent biographies of his gifted son, clearly shows that he was not only deeply imbued with strong religious feelings, but that he was possessed also of considerable intellectual power, accompanied by a remarkable faculty for logical philosophic reasoning. He ap-

pears likewise to have had a facility in expressing his ideas in clear, concise, and expressibly appropriate language, such as seldom forms the mode of expression of persons of his education and moving in his position in life. It seems, too, that in addition to being a man of some mental culture, he was also an acute and efficient man of business. Among the few precious relics of her father which Mrs. Begg fondly treasured, there is a small "Memorandum Book," the entries in which clearly stamp him as a methodical and competent "man of affairs," possessing considerable aptitude for matters of accounting and finance. This interesting record of the past is now cut up



into shreds, owing, it is supposed, to the frequent applications made to his daughter for a scrap of her father's handwriting—applications which her good nature was quite unable to withstand. Enough still remains, however, to connect the entries with the "Lochlea period," and one of the pages contains a carefully prepared state of Charge and Discharge as between his landlord, Mr. M'Clure, and himself, which seems to indicate that the dispute between them, which resulted in the "vortex of litigation" referred to by the poet, consisted of a claim which is thus stated in the handwriting of William Burness: "To damages for want of the loch drained @ £21 7s. per year, for

five years, £106 15s." From other memoranda occurring elsewhere in the same note-book, it would seem that the state referred to was intended by William Burness to show the balancing of accounts between him and his landlord as at Martinmas 1784—a term which he did not live to see; and probably the complicated accounting, not less than four times anxiously repeated in a tentative way, and in different shapes, formed the old man's occupation during the winter of 1783-84, when the gradual but steady inroads of his fatal illness occasioned him no doubt the deepest anxiety for the future welfare of those dependent upon him.

Such were the circumstances and influences which surrounded Mrs. Begg during the years of her girlhood. Born at Mount Oliphant in the year 1771, only a few years before her father abandoned that farm, she may be said to have gathered her earliest experience of life on the farm of Lochlea, where she passed the seven years of her existence extending from her sixth to her thirteenth year.

Her reminiscences of this period of her life were of too sacred a character to be alluded to except within the limits of her own family circle, or to some specially favoured and sympathetic listener; and the light which these shed on the early years of the

poet was alike fascinating and instructive. From this reliable source is derived the deeply interesting information that her father had from a very early period of the poet's childhood discerned the exceptional talents of his eldest son, and had solemnly predicted to his wife that, "whoever may live to see it, something extraordinary will come from that boy." From her, too, comes the information that the aged father actually lived to realise in some measure, and probably not without a mysterious blending of parental pride with parental anxiety, the truth of his own prediction. Some of the early effusions of his son's genius he lived to read and to appreciate very highly, and

among these he especially admired the exquisite tenderness of sentiment in the matchless song, "My Nanny, O!" Mrs. Begg, too, used to relate with much enjoyment a domestic incident at Lochlea which revealed her father and his gifted son in a very real and characteristic light. In the winter of 1781-82, while Burns was paying court to the earliest of his many successive divinities, Ellison Begbie, who lived on the banks of the Cessnock, about two miles from Lochlea, his father became naturally alarmed at the lateness of the hour at which his son occasionally returned home. In order to administer a fitting rebuke to his son, the father one night insisted on sitting up for

him. When, therefore, the youthful bard at length appeared, he found his father in waiting for him in his severest admonitory mood. On being asked the reason for his detention to such a late hour, the son began at once to give to his father so humorous and fanciful a description of his experiences and difficulties in his journey homewards, that the old man became interested and amused by the recital, and not only forgot entirely the intended rebuke, but actually continued sitting at the side of the kitchen fire for two hours longer enjoying his son's fascinating conversation.

It need scarcely be said that the seven years which Mrs Begg spent at

Lochlea always formed a pleasing and happy memory to her, for they were hallowed by a father's love and fostering care. In her own words, as recorded by Dr. Robert Chambers—

“Her main occupation was one suited to her tender years—that of tending the cattle in the field. Her father would often visit her, sit down by her side, and tell her the names of the various grasses and wild flowers, as if to lose no opportunity of imparting instruction. When it thundered she was sure he would come to her, because he knew that on such occasions she was apt to suffer much from terror.”

These simple and homely reminiscences present to us a touching picture of paternal love and protection on the one hand, and of childlike confidence and trust on the other; and the picture

becomes still more touching when we read her pathetic description of the scene around her father's deathbed, on 13th February 1784.

“She remembered being at her father's bedside on that morning, with no other company besides her brother Robert. Seeing her cry bitterly at the thought of the impending parting, her father endeavoured to speak, but could only murmur a few words of comfort such as might be suitable to a child (she was then only twelve years of age) concluding with an injunction ‘to walk in Virtue's paths and to shun every vice.’ After a pause he said there was one of his family for whose future conduct he feared. He repeated the same expression, when the young poet came up and said, ‘Oh, father, is it me that you mean?’ The old man said it was. Robert turned to the window with the tears streaming down his manly cheeks and his bosom heaving as if it would burst, from the very restraint he put upon himself.”



The saying that the future is mercifully hid from our scrutiny may be trite and commonplace, but it is a truism of which every succeeding year's experience only tends to make the triteness more impressive and solemnising. How merciful it was that, amid the fears and anxieties as to the future of his illustrious first-born which depressed the dying father, there was mingled no anticipation of the life of trial and privation and suffering which, by the mysterious decrees of Divine Providence, awaited the child of his old age as well ! What a pang of anguish it would have cost him had he foreseen the life of early widowhood, poverty, and care which lay before the little

black-eyed girl who sobbed at his bedside in all the bitterness of a child's first real sorrow! And yet had there been vouchsafed to him a glimpse of the future life of his youngest and favourite child, it would only have revealed to him a noble instance of trials calmly met, of privations bravely endured, and of difficulties determinedly and honourably surmounted.

Mrs. Begg's recollections of her mother were, like those which she fondly treasured of her father, fraught with the deepest filial reverence and affection, although they were of a somewhat less idealistic character. It was only natural that they should be so, for she was bereft of her father at the very

stage in her life when her feelings were keenest and most impressionable, while her mother's death did not occur until after she herself had reached the shadowy side of life, and had passed through many a sad and bitter trial. She always spoke of her mother with the tenderest love. She described her as being neat and small in figure, having a fine complexion, pale red hair, and beautiful dark eyes, and possessing an active, industrious, and cheerful temperament, although in later life depressed by anxieties, arising, no doubt, from the hardships and difficulties she had been called upon to endure. She also stated that she sang very sweetly, and had an inexhaustible store of

old ballads and songs. One incident illustrative of her mother's devotion as a wife, as well as of her natural energy of character, she used to relate with much feeling. It occurred after her father's naturally vigorous constitution had begun to be weakened by the gradual approach of the illness which cut him off. Coming in one day weary and exhausted from sowing, he found he had used up all his thrashed-out grain, and he was desirous to provide some for his horses' midday "feed." His worthy helpmate, however, insisted that he should refresh himself with a rest, while she herself proceeded to the barn, accompanied by her servant girl, Lizzie Paton, and, vigorously wielding

the flail, thrashed out and winnowed as much grain as was required. These details, trivial though they are, shed a flood of pleasing light over the circumstances which surrounded and influenced the early years of the poet ; and who can estimate the effect they exercised in developing and intensifying that spirit of consideration for others which formed so prominent a feature in his large-hearted, generous nature ?

After the death of William Burness in 1784, his widow and children—Robert, Gilbert, William, Agnes, Annabella, and Isobel (John having died about a year before his father)—removed to the farm of Mossgiel, in the parish of Mauchline, and there Isobel

spent a period of fully nine years, during which she was occupied in assisting in the ordinary household and other duties connected with an Ayrshire pastoral farm. Her life at Mossgiel seems to have been not less happy than it had previously been at Lochlea. It is true she had no longer the companionship and protection of her revered father, but in her eldest brother she had found one who, by his unselfish, sympathetic nature, was as nearly capable as any person could be of filling up that irreparable void in her existence. A touching proof of this is narrated by Mr. David Dunlop, solicitor, Ayr, who was a much trusted friend of Mrs. Begg and her two daughters

down to the very dates of their deaths. In October 1857 he and a friend were taking tea with Mrs. Begg and her daughters at their cottage at Belleisle, and in course of conversation Mr. Dunlop remarked to one of the daughters—not anticipating that the old lady, who was then in her eighty-sixth year, would overhear him—that he presumed her mother did not remember much of the poet, when she quickly broke into the conversation with the earnest observation, “I never can forget my brother, I was just twelve when my father was taken away, and Robert was both father and brother to me.”

Mrs. Begg's personal intercourse with her gifted brother was chiefly condensed

within the period of nine years spent by her at Mossgiel, or rather within the first half of that period, for the poet along with his wife took up house at Ellisland, in Nithsdale, in 1788. During the four years which Robert spent under the family roof at Mossgiel his sister was deeply interested in his "poetic flights." She seems to have been much in his confidence, and as she was gifted with considerable musical taste and a sweet voice, he frequently utilised her services by causing her to sing over to him the songs he was engaged in composing. She was also in the habit of making herself familiar with the other effusions on which he was at this period exercising his poetic fancy. In



her old age she used often to relate how the poet was in the habit of hurrying through his midday meal at Moss-giel in order that he might, before resuming his afternoon's work, commit to writing, in the privacy of his own and his brother Gilbert's sleeping apartment—an attic room above the kitchen—the verses which his fancy had suggested during his outdoor labours in the earlier part of the day. These were generally written down upon a slate, and in his absence his young sister was in the habit of stealing up to his room and greedily devouring her brother's poetic fancies as these were thus hurriedly transcribed by him from day to day.

A special interest attaches itself to this brief glimpse of the family life at Mossgiel which makes one prone to linger over it, in the vain attempt to realise the bewildering revelation which, within that humble attic room, must have dawned on the youthful bard's still more youthful sister. Hers was probably the first eye which discerned the glow of the rising luminary. Among the poems passing under her scrutiny must have been included "The Cottar's Saturday Night," "Address to a Mouse," "Address to a Mountain Daisy," "Epistle to a Young Friend," and other early effusions of Burns, which, for beauty and depth of sentiment, classic purity of expres-

sion, and genuine tenderness of feeling, were in his more mature years never surpassed. She was then in her sixteenth year, and, alike from her own poetic temperament and her natural discrimination of taste, she was peculiarly fitted to appreciate at their true value the richness and beauty of sentiment breathed in her brother's early "wood notes wild." She could therefore scarcely fail to foresee that the hurriedly-written stanzas, on which she thus by stolen glimpses delighted to feast her fancy from day to day would yet raise to a place among the immortals the brother with whom she was then so closely and lovingly associated

amid all the commonplace realities of humble, toiling, everyday family life.

In 1793, six years after the poet had left the parental roof, the link which had hitherto bound Isobel so closely and affectionately to the family circle at Mossgiel was superseded by the still closer tie of matrimony. On the 9th December of that year she, in the twenty-second year of her age, was married to Mr. John Begg, nephew of Mr. Campbell, farmer, Roughdyke, in the parish of Sorn, by whom he (being an orphan) had been brought up and educated, and on whose farm he assisted. The marriage was in every respect a suitable one, and held out reasonable promise of many years of domestic

felicity. The young couple took up their abode in Mauchline, and passed there the first seven years of their wedded life, during which period the death of the poet occurred at Dumfries on 21st July, 1798. In 1800 Mrs. Begg and her husband removed to the farm of Dinning, in the parish of Closeburn, Dumfriesshire, which three years previously had been leased by her elder brother, Gilbert. The recent death of Burns had awakened anew the public interest in his genius, and through the kindness of his staunch friend and correspondent, Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, his brother Gilbert had been appointed to the management of the farm of Morham Muir, near Haddington. As the

duties of this situation necessitated a change of residence on Gilbert's part, he induced his brother-in-law, of whom he had a very high opinion, to undertake the management of Dinning farm in his absence. This arrangement continued until the expiry of Gilbert Burns's lease of Dinning in 1810, when Mr. Begg was appointed factor to Mr. Hope Vere of Blackwood, in Lanarkshire. After being resident there for about three years, there occurred the great and overshadowing calamity of Mrs. Begg's whole life. Her husband was in the habit of riding to Lesmahagow to attend the market there, and on the 24th April, 1813, instead of using the horse he usually rode, he was

induced to use one belonging to Mr. Hope Vere, which had been showing symptoms of fractiousness owing to want of exercise. All went well on the journey to the market, but when starting on his return the high-spirited animal, fretful at finding its impatience checked, reared and fell backwards on its rider, crushing him to death. By this tragic event Mrs. Begg found herself a widow, with nine children unprovided for, and entirely dependent on her for their maintenance and support—William, aged eighteen; John, sixteen; Robert, fifteen; Agnes, thirteen; Gilbert, eleven; Jane, nine; Isabella, seven; James, four; and Edward, three.

How the earlier years of her widowhood and desolation were surmounted is known only to Him who never fails to be "the widow's help and the orphan's stay." By dint of opening a girl's school in the neighbouring village of Kirkmuirhill, the dauntless and energetic mother contrived to earn an income which, with the help of a small annual grant temporarily allowed her by Mr. Hope Vere, provided a bare and scanty subsistence for her and her helpless children, and by this means she struggled through the first four years of her widowhood. William, her eldest son, although verging on manhood, was unable to be of much assistance to his mother. He was a



youth of superior abilities and much promise, and at the time of his father's sudden and unexpected death he was engaged in qualifying himself for the medical profession by the requisite attendance at Edinburgh University. The paramount exigencies of his mother and family, however, compelled him to abandon this career, and, as an immediate means of gaining a livelihood for himself and of assisting his mother in her time of greatest need, he at once devoted himself to teaching. After acting for some time as assistant teacher in Dalmeny Academy and elsewhere, he, in 1817, secured the appointment of parish schoolmaster at Ormiston, in the county of Edinburgh,

and he took his mother and his young brothers and sisters to reside with him in the schoolhouse there. The income arising from this appointment, small as it was, must have proved a material and opportune aid to Mrs. Begg. Combined with what she herself still continued to earn by conducting a female school at Ormiston, and the proceeds of her own and her daughters' industry with their needles, it by frugal and economical management provided in a way for the simple wants of the numerous household. Even yet, however, the well-merited haven of peace and rest and comfort was far from being attained, and many years of anxious and harassing cares had still to be endured.

From letters addressed by Mrs. Begg to her third son Robert, who succeeded his eldest brother William as assistant teacher at Dalmeny Academy, and afterwards became schoolmaster of the parish of Kinross, it is clear that calamities and trials of a new but not less depressing and wearing out character began to gather thickly around her in her new home at Ormiston. These letters were written at very irregular intervals and embrace a period of fully fourteen years, extending from the year 1819, soon after she had become resident at Ormiston, down to the year 1834, when, after the departure of her eldest son for America, she was located in the village of Tranent

maintaining herself and family by her own honourable industry and that of her affectionate and devoted daughters, Agnes and Isabella. These letters were found in the repositories of her son Robert, after his death in the schoolhouse at Kinross, on 25th July 1876, in the eightieth year of his age. They had been sacredly treasured by him as much valued mementoes of one for whom he had all his life through cherished the deepest filial affection and reverence, and who in return had in all her afflictions and misfortunes clung to him as her chief earthly comfort and hope. The correspondence is of a deeply interesting character, arising not only from the nature of the

various incidents and topics to which it refers, but also and still more from the extremely forcible and almost classic elegance of diction which it sometimes displays. Indeed, the mere superficial appearance of the letters is in itself interestingly suggestive. They are written in a very plain and distinct but utterly unformed hand, showing clearly that writing was anything but a frequent or even a congenial task, and yet, notwithstanding this evident fact, they are expressed in language which, for grace and ease of diction and force and appropriateness of expression, might almost have flowed from the facile pen of the poet himself. The phraseology of the letters, elevated as

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it is, is quite unstilted and unstudied, and it clearly forms the natural, unaffected, and spontaneous utterances of a large and loving nature, influenced by much fervour of poetic sentiment, but governed throughout by a vigorous and sagacious intellect, and at the same time by acutely discriminating good taste.

The incidents in Mrs. Begg's life during the period embraced by this correspondence cannot be better or more forcibly depicted than by reproducing here some extracts from the letters themselves, and few, we think, too, can read these extracts without recognising the "family likeness" already referred to as traceable between her

mode of thought and form of expression and those of her gifted brother. This "strain" of similarity, if the assumption of its existence is well founded, becomes a not unimportant literary fact, as it tends to negative the opinion of Lord Jeffrey and other recognised authorities on English classic composition, that the epistolary diction of Burns was an artificial and laboured acquisition, altogether alien to his character. In the case of his sister no such theory can for a moment be maintained by any one who reads her letters in the light of her position in life, and the circumstances under which they were written. They form the unconventional and confidential communications

of a mother to her son, for whose perusal alone they were intended. It is this which imparts the touch of genuine originality and thorough naturalness to the dignified and cultured form of expression adopted by Mrs. Begg; and it is this which seems to indicate that her natural gift, such as it was, proceeded from none other than the same parent source from which the poet himself inherited his more fervid and brilliant, but not less natural style of diction. Carlyle happily characterizes the letters of Burns as "simple, vigorous, expressive—sometimes even beautiful," and in a sense modified to the widely differing circumstances and experiences of the writers, the letters of



his sister may almost be similarly characterized.

The first of the letters to which reference has been made, is dated 18th April, 1819. It contains a graphic and pathetic statement by Mrs. Begg of the depressing maternal cares and anxieties with which she at that time had to contend, but a characteristic touch of humour is ere long permitted to break through the despondent narrative.

"I have talked," she says, "of writing to you this fortnight past, but have not been able to get the better of indolence so far as to do it. . . . We are all got the better of our complaints now, but it is only within these three weeks that I am able to write a letter to any one, or to be of any manner of use in my family. . . ."

"Our school was examined last Monday, and your youngest sister won the two first prizes, and Jane got a very pretty psalm-book for the catechism; but poor Edward, though he laboured sore, was only second of his class; but Hope, the never-failing friend of the unfortunate, flatters him with the promise of a prize next year. . . .

"I heard from your uncle [her brother, Gilbert] last Friday, and they are all well. We have not seen any of them since you were here, but I am going to visit them the first good day after I have got some bare bottoms clad, which I am under the necessity of imploring your help to accomplish, as I have been able to do very little for myself this winter. Farewell, and may the orphan's help be your friend and protector is the sincere wish of your affectionate mother."

A subsequent letter, dated 13th July of the same year (1819), is in the same sad tone, relieved here and there by involuntary indications of that irrepressible humour which formed a prominent

feature in her character, and which no doubt helped to sustain her under her numerous trials and difficulties.

“You will blame me very much for being so long in writing you, and indeed I am without excuse, therefore I shall not attempt to make one, but try to answer your kind letter the best way I can, and I must thank you for your present, which was indeed a seasonable one, for my difficulties seem to multiply with my days. Edward, too, returns you many thanks for his psalm-book, with which he was much delighted; but you would have felt for poor James had you seen how disappointed he was; but he bade me thank you for your promise of sending him something, the choice of which he leaves to yourself, only he thinks psalm-books are very dear things, and perhaps a pistol would be cheaper; but you will see the impropriety of indulging this wish.

“You bid me write of all my ills, real or imaginary; but I have felt and daily feel so many of the real ills of life that I have no imaginary ones to complain of. But though my cup of life has been very bitter for these some years past,

still there has been mixed in it a drop of sweet now and then, and I dare not nor will not complain."

There also occurs in this letter the following pungent allusion to a dispute which had arisen between her eldest son as schoolmaster of Ormiston and his clerical supervisor:—

"I am sorry to say that your brother has got embroiled with this overbearing priest of ours, who is positively the greatest fool that ever wore a black coat, and I expect nothing but a living plague of him as long as we are within his power. Had your brother nothing but himself to care for, it would give me no concern; but while he has so broad a mark for misfortune in his father's family hanging such a burden upon him, it distresses me very much.

"Your grandmother [the poet's mother, then resident with her son Gilbert at Grantsbraes near Haddington] is still confined to her bed, and I am afraid she will never be able to sit out

of it again ; but she seems to have no ailment but the decay of nature. . . . I had a letter last week from your aunt Galt [her sister Agnes]. She is well, but does not feel comfortable in the land of the shamrock. . . .”

In another letter, dated 21st November 1819, her maternal despondency, intensified by weakness arising from recent illness, again finds graphic and pathetic expression :—

“I am thankful to God that I am again able to write you, though I doubt much if you will be able to read what I write, my hand is so unsteady from my extreme weakness ; but I am now quite well in health, and I hope I shall soon be able to work at my needle as usual. The rest are all well. We had a visit of Gilbert [her son] last night, which we have not had since that unwelcome one when he left his master. He is well, and I never saw him looking better, and what is still more agreeable, I have had repeated intelligence from your uncle [her brother Gilbert], who, you know, never

draws a flattering picture, that he is doing well and Mr. Lamb is much pleased with him. I wish to heaven it may continue ; and I hope still, for all his vagaries, he may be an honour to his friends and a comfort to his mother. I am much afraid all is not well with John [another son] from his silence to you, for I have not wrote him since I had his last letter, which I received the week before I took the fever ; and I had a letter from Betty Thomson [an illegitimate daughter of the poet] last week, and she says she had not seen him for a long time, and last time she saw him he had got warning to leave his master. This intelligence has distressed me very much. . . . What in the name of goodness will become of him if he does not get work ? Betty, too, draws a picture of horror. Her husband was for some time idle, and he is now working as a labourer for nine shillings per week, and with broken weather he often did not earn half of it. God help them ! Poor creatures ! I have not filled my mouth once but I have thought of them."

The opening days of the succeeding year (1820) witnessed the gradual and

peaceful fulfilment of the foreboding in regard to her mother's illness to which Mrs. Begg had given expression in her letter of the previous summer. On 14th January the venerable mother of the poet, after a prolonged life of nearly ninety years, peacefully sank to her final rest within her son Gilbert's house at Grantsbraes. Mrs. Begg's letter to her son announcing this event is disappointingly brief, but the reasons for its brevity are sufficiently disclosed by the letter itself.

*"Monday Evening.*

"MY DEAR ROBERT,—Your brother has informed you of the death of your grandmother, and though it is an event we have long looked for, yet I cannot contemplate it without feelings of much distress, and it is heightened by the

situation of your aunt Burns [her brother Gilbert's wife], who is very ill. I have not seen her, but Nancy was there to-day, and from her account she is in a very alarming state. They had not called the surgeon until yesterday, and he took three teacupful of blood from her yesterday, and as much to-day, and she is forbid to speak or make the smallest exertion. Your uncle will write you when he is determined when the funeral is to take place. . . . He is thinking of Thursday, and I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you on Wednesday evening.

"I had a letter the week before last from John [her elder son, who had recently sustained a family bereavement]. He is well and composed, and though he must feel his sorrows like a man, he also seems to bear them like a man. Good night, my dear child. May God bless you, and make you good and wise and happy.—Your Affectionate mother,

"ISABELLA BEGG."

The poet's mother was interred in Bolton Churchyard at noon on Thursday, 20th January 1820, and many is



the pilgrimage which has since that date been made to her lowly grave by the enthusiastic admirers of her son's genius. During the past half-century much has been written, both in prose and verse, in honour of "Agnes Brown," but perhaps the most touching and eloquent tribute to her memory is that contained in a poetic reverie over her grave by Mr. John Russell, of *Chambers's Journal*, from which are extracted the following six stanzas:—

"Here in this alien ground her ashes lie,  
Far from her native haunts on Carrick shore,  
Far from where first she felt a mother's joy  
O'er the brave child she bore.

"Ah, who can tell the thoughts that on her prest  
As o'er his cradle-bed she bent in bliss,

Or gave from the sweet fountains of her breast  
The life that nourished his ?

“ Perhaps in prescient vision came to her  
Some shadowings of the glory, yet afar,  
Of that fierce storm whence rose serene and  
clear  
His never-setting star.

“ But dreamt she ever, as she sang to still  
His infant heart in slumber sweet and long,  
That he who, silent lay the while, should fill  
Half the round world with song ?

‘ Yet so he filled it ; and she lived to see  
The singer, chapleted with laurel, stand,  
Upon his lips that wondrous melody  
Which thrilled his native land.

“ She saw, too, when had passed the singer’s  
breath,  
A nation’s proud heart throbbing at his  
name,  
Forgetting in the pitying light of death  
Whatever was of blame.”

During the spring following her mother's death, Mrs. Begg's maternal anxieties seem chiefly to have been concentrated on the necessity for securing higher class education for her daughter Jane, a delicate but exceedingly interesting and promising girl, then in the sixteenth year of her age. In a postscript to a letter from her eldest son to his brother Robert, dated 30th March 1820, she says :—

“I would wish to write you, as I do not like to see a blank page in your letter ; but as I have suffered more than an ordinary share of vexation of spirit this some time, I perhaps may not find words fit to lay before you. My plan for Jeanie, on which my mind was so ardently bent, is entirely defeated. When I came to close enquiry about the teacher in Tranent of whom I had heard so much, I found she taught nothing that

I wanted ; and what shall I do, or rather what can I do, but sit down and cry in vexation, disappointment, and remorse ? Your ——'s people, if they were willing, could easily help us without injuring themselves much, but I have received more obligations at their hands than I have been able to swallow. . . .”

In her next letter (24th April 1820), the same engrossing subject is again discussed in a shrewd and practical manner, and leads in the most natural way to an incidental expression of political sentiment, which for vigour and independence might fitly have formed part of one of the poet's own trenchant utterances :—

“I have as desired thought anxiously on your proposal for Jane, and most ardently do I wish it was in our power to send her, but how shall we be able to support such an additional expense ? How-

ever, I wish you would enquire after the terms—there can be nothing amiss in that—and let me know. Jeanie is just at the best time of life for leaving with advantage to herself, and she has much need of seeing a little more of the world beyond her mother's fireside. I regret our bewildered situation in this filthy place, as much on account of your two little sisters almost as anything else. Were we, for instance, within the reach of a school such as that you mention in Queensferry, what a treasure would it be to them! But I must investigate this unpleasant subject no further, else I shall grow quite unhappy and lose the enjoyment of this delightful afternoon, which is as much mine as the king's, for all the parade that is making about him to-day. By-the-bye, I must tell you that our Ormiston gentry are run mad with loyalty. They have got a cart of coals lighted at the Cross, and are to hold a general meeting at six in the evening to drink the King's health. What sort of meeting will it be, think you, when there is almost as many different parties as individuals? . . .”

In a subsequent part of the same letter there is conveyed, in all the pride of a mother's heart, the intelligence that her son Edward's hopes of the previous year had not proved delusive :—

“Edward got the second best prize for being dux in the catechism, and I do not know whether his mother or he felt most delighted! . . .  
*P.S.*—It is now past eleven, and our loyal fools are not left the convivial board. Is it not an auspicious beginning of a reign? Good night!”

On 28th May 1820, the subject of her daughter's education again forms the theme of an interesting practical letter :—

“I have read your letter for the twentieth time, and I am very grateful to you indeed for your kind exertions in favour of your

sisters, and I am obliged to Mrs. — for the trouble she has taken for my unfortunate daughters. Miss M——'s boarding is, as you say, by far too high for us to think of in the present state of our family. The taking a room is certainly the best plan for us, as it will be cheaper, for boarding, unless it was in a genteel family, is of no use, and we cannot expect boarding very cheap in any family of that description. The room, therefore, is the plan to be adopted, and your idea of sending them both is surely very proper, as they could attend to different branches of education at the same time, and improve one another after their return, and they will be much happier together; but if we think of sending them both, it must be deferred till the spring, as it would be injuring Isabella very much to take her from school just now. She is learning arithmetic and French, and, I think, with tolerable success, and they are both branches of the utmost utility to her, and she never can acquire them under an abler teacher. Jeanie, too, is attending French. She, poor girl, has been much afflicted with that nervous headache for this week past, and I am afraid the confinement of a school would increase it. So

from all these considerations, if you have made no positive engagement about the room, we had better put it off for some time. . . . I earnestly wish it may please God to put it in our power to realise this scheme, for I think it would be a means of securing independence to your sisters—an independence which my heart bleeds to tell you . . . renders every day more and more necessary.”

In a letter dated 1st April, 1821, almost exclusively devoted to the expression of her maternal fears and anxieties occasioned by the roving, unsettled habits of two of her sons, who had now attained to manhood, she adds :—

“My mind is familiar with little else but feelings of sadness. You can hardly imagine what I have suffered for some months past. I have dwelt on this disagreeable theme until I am almost unable to proceed with my letter. . . .”



There then occurs the following touching reference to her desire to see her eldest son removed from Ormiston to a parish of greater importance, and affording better scope for his superior educational capabilities :—

“ You have opened a new source of action for that never-failing friend of man, Hope, in your intelligence concerning Dunkeld. I hope William will make a spirited push for it, but I shall sit as loose to the result as possible, for I was much disappointed at the unsuccessful application for Dumfries, for I thought if he could have interest anywhere it was there.”

In the spring of the following year (1822) there is conveyed in a letter, dated 19th April, the first intelligence of the illness which, by its fatal termination in July of the same year,

broke down all her anxiously matured plans for the completion of the education of her daughter Jane, and probably a more pathetic wail was never wrung from a mother's sorrow-stricken heart :—

“I received your letter, and I know you will be very angry with me for not answering it sooner. Indeed, I have been angry with myself a thousand times, but you know it is an Herculean labour for me to write a letter, and I have wrote two this last week, so you may suppose it will cost me a good deal of exertion to write another. . . . Poor Jane left Edinburgh the Tuesday after you saw her, in a very ill state of health indeed ; and she is very little better yet, if at all, and I am sorely alarmed about her. William laughs, or pretends to laugh, at my fears ; but I have always thought her mind and body too delicate to be long an inhabitant of this world. I wish I could say with Eli, ‘It is the Lord : let Him do to me as it seemeth Him good ;’ but this is far from being the language of my heart. But I must learn submission, and

I trust the Almighty Author of our being, who has implanted those tender feelings in the breast of His creatures, will pardon the effects of them in the hour of severe trial."

Referring in the same letter to her son Robert's recent appointment to the office of schoolmaster of Kinross parish, she remarks :—

"Your brother has been busy with his school examination, which took place last Monday. You must write him soon, and tell us what class of people your scholars are mostly composed of—whether they will call forth the exercise of your talents as a classical teacher, or if they will lie dormant, like your brother's in Ormiston."

In a letter dated 14th August, 1822, only a month after her daughter's death, there are again sad indications of impending bereavement. Edward, her youngest child, then eleven years

of age, having three weeks previously begun to exhibit symptoms of a lingering illness, under which he gradually sank in March, 1824. During this trying period of nearly two years, Mrs. Begg seems to have been engrossed in ministering to her dying boy, and there is only one solitary letter from her in the interval. It is dated 5th December, 1823, and it still dwells painfully on her fears and anxieties for the wanderer of the family.

“I received your last letter with much pleasure, as I grew very anxious about your long silence, and I had hoped that you would be able to give me some intelligence of my poor, lost, deluded Gilbert; but now these hopes are fled, and what am I to think or what am I to do? It is impossible to describe the painful feelings which this sad uncertainty has given me. For

goodness sake tell me what John supposes. What were his motives for going away, what society he had (for he would hardly go by himself), and if he never heard of him after he left Hamilton. He must have taken some desperate step, or some dreadful thing has befallen him, or we must have heard something of him by this time, I am lost in conjecture, and every idea that I can form is replete with horror. I hope you will write me soon ; but you can have no comfort to give me, for all my sufferings, painful as they have been, fall short of this. I wish you could advise me what to do with James. He is grown very anxious to get away, and I am still uncertain what to do. A shopkeeper or baker are the only things he makes choice of. The former I would prefer from the superior society (comparatively) to which it would introduce him, but I am afraid the latter will be most easily attained. Tell me what you think. Poor Edward is much fallen off since you saw him. He is walking on crutches, as he can make very little use of his limbs. The doctor has been teasing him with blisters, seemingly with very little hope of success ; but we are willing to do what we can, but I fear his delicate constitution

will not be able to stand much. All the rest are well. You must excuse this short letter ; I will write you a longer one next time. God bless you, into whose all-sufficient protection I commend you."

The death of her youngest child was a heavy trial to Mrs. Begg. She had already sustained bereavement and misfortune greater than that which falls to the lot of most women, and nothing but her natural energy of character, and calm dignified self-possession, enabled her to bear up under this bitter accumulated sorrow. That it created a void in her existence as permanent as it was painful was evidenced by the frequency with which pathetic allusions to "my little Edward" dropped casually from the aged mother's lips, down even to

the period of her own death, nearly forty years after her boy's brief existence had terminated. The toys he had amused himself with, the copy-books he had written, even the little stool on which, during his long period of bodily weakness, he had sat leaning on his mother's knee, were all fondly treasured by her as mementoes of her dead child. This stool in particular seemed to be regarded with an almost sacred feeling. Down to the day of her death it regularly stood close to her own favourite chair at the fireside of her cottage at Belleisle, and if any of her juvenile friends were invited to sit upon it, they never failed to regard the

privilege as a mark of exceptional favour.

The letters of 1824 and subsequent years are almost exclusively filled with shrewd, house-wifely advices to her son in regard to house furnishing, and other incidental domestic arrangements connected with his taking possession of the schoolhouse at Kinross, which had been erected for his accommodation. These are characterised by sound, practical common sense and good taste, although, when regarded in the light of modern ideas and experiences, they occasionally suggest an amusing contrast. For example, take the following pithy observations on that most inexhaustible of all topics, the female domestic :—



“I am thinking of coming over to Kinross to set you all to rights in your new house, for I see that if you are entirely left to yourself you are likely to go very far wrong. Another thing I am quite astonished at is the wages you propose for your servant, if you mean £6 in the half year [the wages were yearly—not half-yearly, as supposed]; and I am afraid the lady you speak of is far more a friend to the woman than to you. I see no need you have for such an expensive servant, as a new house is so easily kept clean, and your work will be so very small that one of less experience will do you well enough, if she is an honest, cleanly creature, and has an ordinary share of common sense.”

Another of the letters of this period is somewhat characteristic. It commences, “My dear Children,” and is evidently intended for the joint benefit of her son and his youngest sister, Isabella, who was then on a visit to him at Kinross schoolhouse :—

“Your [eldest] sister is this moment left me, and your brother, according to custom, is gone to the doctor, and I am left to my solitude. I see you are enjoying yourselves well. I am afraid Isabella will feel a sad void when she returns to the still life we lead in Ormiston after so much gaiety, and I fancy she will put her return as far off as possible. However, she may make her own time for anything that I see; but I understand there is a meeting of the schoolmasters in Edinburgh on Saturday, which probably you will attend, and if she is able to travel the day after the ball, to which she seems to look forward with so much delight, she will have a brother’s protection at both ends of the journey as William is going to the meeting. But do as you shall judge proper, and let her take care of her health. I am very angry at the contemptuous manner Isabella speaks of my good friend Laird C——. I suppose she expected to see a beau like——; and though his manners are plain, they are far from being rude. So P—— M—— is a favourite with Isabella. This I can allow, for he is certainly one of a thousand; but talk not to me of A—— C——, for the child who can use his parent in the unfeeling, disrespectful manner he

does his old father, shows a heart void of every right feeling or principle."

As a further quotation from Mrs. Begg's letters, the following very characteristic and kindly New Year's greeting to her son Robert and his young wife, on 4th January, 1829, cannot be omitted:—

"Many happy returns of the season to you, my dear children ! May the good things brought forth by the sun, and the good things brought forth by the moon, be your portion ; and above all, may you enjoy the blessing of God, which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow thereunto. I received your last letter, which I was glad to see, for I almost thought that you had forgotten me ; and though I allow your fireside is and ought to be very dear to you, yet I cannot bear the thought of being altogether excluded from a share in your remembrance. I am much obliged to Grace [her daughter-in-law] for the intelligence concerning my young friends [her grandchildren].

Dear little things! I was much disappointed indeed that I could not get over to see them in autumn, but this saving system which we have been obliged to adopt has made me sacrifice much of my own gratification for the good of the whole."

This letter also contains an expression of sympathy for an interesting young friend who had been left a widow with little or no provision for her earthly comfort, and the genuine earnestness of its terms is pathetically suggestive of the still more bitter experiences she herself had been called upon to undergo some twelve years before:—

"I was very sorry to hear of poor Mrs. L——'s accumulated distresses. What a merciful dispensation that she has no family! What are one's own wants to the sufferings of a widowed mother, surrounded by a number of

dear little beings that she loves as her own life, looking to her for the supply of wants she has not the power to gratify? Oh, it is super-eminent misery ! ”

This letter also discloses a new calamity which had recently added additional bitterness to her already brimming cup of sorrow. Her youngest son, James, a high-spirited lad—the same who, in his tenth year, had expressed so decided a preference for a “pistol” as compared with a “psalm-book”—had broken his apprenticeship as a baker, and had enlisted as a private soldier in the 26th Regiment, then in Edinburgh Castle, on the eve of departure for active service in India. She says :—

“Not a single line from poor James, and I know not what to think. Oh, what suffering has that thoughtless boy heaped upon his mother, and, what is worse, upon himself! He will find by this time, if he is still in existence, that a soldier’s life is not to be estimated by their duty in Edinburgh Castle. Gilbert says most truly that his profession is no disgrace to him, were it not that the profession is disgraced by so many mean, base scoundrels getting into it that have been kicked out of every other society of men.”

In a subsequent letter, dated 2nd August of the same year, there occurs the following allusion to the same subject :—

“I have heard nothing of James since his first letter after reaching Madras, and anxiously have I been watching the arrival of the ships from India, but they have brought me nothing but disappointment.”

Of this “anxious watching” for news of her soldier son, absorbing twelve

years of her life, the results were only disclosed at her death, when there was found carefully preserved among her domestic treasures a bundle of interesting letters, dating from 1829 to 1840, in which the wanderer detailed his experiences during his military career in India. Stationed first at Madras, and afterwards at Taragonee, Meerut, and Ghazeepore, he steadily worked his way upward to the rank of sergeant. In his last letter, written on board the "Ernaad," at Penang, on 20th April, 1840, he informs his mother that he is on his way to China with his regiment, and he adds, with the true ardour of a soldier, "I hope we will have something more to do than the last expedition we

went on ; not that the Bengal princes are more inclined to show the white feather, but the Chinese have never been tried, and therefore will be more conceited." The series of letters closes sadly, but not inappropriately, with a formal communication from the War Office announcing his death at Chuzan on the 2nd November, 1840, and enclosing a silver medal which had been awarded to him for "distinguished conduct" in China.

Mrs. Begg's letter of 1829 closes the correspondence from which these extracts are made. Although still under sixty years of age and enjoying active, vigorous health, her lack of facility in penmanship naturally led her to devolve



on her youngest daughter, Isabella, who had now attained to womanhood, and was a very able and fluent letter-writer, the duties of "family correspondent," and from this custom she seems only once afterwards to have deviated.

Immediately after returning from a visit to her son at Kinross, she had occasion to write to him on 6th April, 1834, in regard to an effort he was then making to secure for her in her advancing years some fixed and reliable provision in the shape of an annuity under a Mid-Lothian endowment for ladies of straitened means. It may be stated that the effort was successful, and that Mrs. Begg continued to enjoy the small annuity awarded to her for

several years, when, owing to her improved circumstances, she felt herself enabled to relinquish it for the benefit of some probably more necessitous claimant:—

“I presented your letter to Mr. Henderson, and he is most willing to do everything in his power to forward your wishes. He understands the matter perfectly, and the first thing to be done is to get an extract of my age, which he wishes to have immediately, so you must write to Ayr. I was born in 1771, and remember the name is *Burness*. Your sisters are very indignant at this application, but I am impelled by strong necessity’s supreme command to conquer these feelings, however bitterly they may be felt. I reached home that day I left you very much fatigued indeed. I was very sick from the time I left the North Ferry until I came to Edinburgh, when I grew better, and pursued my journey with more ease. You will have seen the death of your aunt [her sister-in-law, Jean Armour] in the newspaper. I had a letter from Robert [the

poet's eldest son] on Monday, with the intelligence of her demise, and, not less distressing information to me, that my sister [Agnes, Mrs. Galt] was reduced to a state of insensibility by a shock of paralysis ; but I trust it is not true, as he speaks of it as report only. I had a visit from your aunt from Grantsbraes [her brother Gilbert's widow] on Thursday. Her family are all well, but not a word of Robert. Poor fellow ! He had the warmest heart in the family, and he seems to be cast out and forgotten. . . .

"I hope you will make no delay in writing to Ayr, as Mr. H. wishes to have the petition got up as soon as possible, that he may have time to strengthen it as far as he can before going to Edinburgh in May, when he intends putting it into the hands of Principal Baird. Farewell, and may the blessing of God rest on every member of your family is the sincere wish of your affectionate mother."

The letter from Robert Burns, the eldest son of the poet, announcing the death of his mother, to which Mrs. Begg refers in the letter above quoted,

she carefully preserved. It is written on the back of a printed card conveying formal intimation of the death as follows :—

“Mrs. Robert Burns died here this evening at half-past eleven o’clock.—Burns Street, 26th March, 1834.”

Robert’s letter is in the following terms :—

“DUMFRIES.

“MY DEAR AUNT,—You will perceive by the other side that my mother is no more. I was at Glasgow when I received intelligence of her having had another shock of paralysis on Saturday evening last, and I hastened home. I arrived in sufficient time to find her in life, and to be certain that she knew me, which was a great consolation to me. She never spoke again after the shock. I received the intelligence on Monday last, just when I was preparing to come to Edinburgh by the canal to see you and my

aunt Burns [his uncle Gilbert's widow]. That pleasure, however, I shall yet have as early as possible. I have addressed the notice to my aunt Burns to your care because I do not know her direction. I am sorry to have to add that I have accidentally heard that your sister Agnes in Ireland is reduced to a state of insensibility by a paralytic shock. I shall be happy to hear from you as early as possible. Give my love to my cousins. Pardon the confused style in which this letter is written, and believe me, my dear aunt, yours affectionately,

“R. BURNS.”

For the reasons already indicated, the experiences of the later period of Mrs. Begg's life cannot be gleaned from her own vigorous graphic utterances, but, fortunately, these can, in a certain measure, be supplied from the personal recollections of the writer of this Memoir. These recollections extend

from nearly the close of the correspondence referred to down to the year 1858, when Mrs. Begg's mortal remains were deposited in "Auld Alloway" kirkyard, beside the ashes of her much revered father.

At the commencement of the period above referred to, Mrs. Begg had already entered on the last decade of the scriptural limit of "three-score and ten." She was not tall in stature, but was decidedly above the average height, although beginning to bend under the accumulating weight of years. Her hair was still wonderfully abundant, and although plentifully tinged with grey, its original blackness was distinctly recognisable. Her strongly

marked and expressive features were remarkably intelligent and pleasing, and her countenance was almost invariably lighted up by a genial smile. The great charm of her face, however, lay in her bright, dark, piercing eyes, which must have strongly resembled those of her brother. The portrait which forms the frontispiece to this "Memoir," although a very correct likeness, does scant justice to her facial expression. It is copied from a life-size half length painted in oil by the late Mr. Robert Taylor of Ayr in 1847, when Mrs. Begg had entered on the 77th year of her age. The picture is now in the possession of the writer of this Memoir. Another portrait of Mrs. Begg also half

length, but very much reduced in size, was painted several years previously by Mr. William Bonnar of Edinburgh, an engraving of it dedicated to the late "Christopher North" being published at the time, and a very imperfect copy of this engraving was published in the *Illustrated London News* of August 1844. The original painting by Bonnar is now in the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, but whatever may be its merits as a work of art it cannot certainly be characterised as a likeness.

Besides resembling the poet in her features Mrs. Begg resembled him not a little in her mental characteristics. Like him, she was endowed with a vigour and force of intellect, and an



acute and active power of perception, which enabled her invariably to express her sentiments in the most appropriate language and at the most opportune moment. She was a large hearted, loving woman, domesticated in her tastes and habits, intensely interested in children, and intensely revered and loved by them in return. Her advent at Kinross schoolhouse was always hailed with boisterous rapture by her somewhat numerous grandchildren there, for her mind was amply stored with quaint legendary and other lore specially suited for their delectation. As a narrator of nursery stories and legendary tales she was unequalled. These were always given in the Scottish

dialect, and her pure Doric accent, combined with the dramatic force and effect which she never failed to impart to the more stirring portions of her narrative, gave to her recitals a breathless interest and fascination which no one but a member of her youthful auditory can now realise. Fully half a century has passed since then ; several of that juvenile auditory have already sunk to their rest, and the lapse of years has blurred or obliterated many a recollection, but still the pleasing memory of those recitals time only seems to render more and more vivid and real.

She was gifted with wonderful powers of memory, and was able to

repeat with unerring accuracy not only her brother's best known poems, but also many favourite selections from the other poets. Of her numerous stories for children there was none in more frequent request than a fable which she used to relate illustrative of the multiplied and varied lures which bestrew life's pathway. This fable she first learned by hearing it recited by the poet to his younger brothers and sisters at the fireside of Lochlea during the long winter evenings, and her firm conviction was that it was composed by Burns for the amusement of herself and the other juvenile members of her father's household. As such the little story is here

given at full length, as it discloses Burns's genius in a novel but not the less deeply interesting and fascinating aspect. The story has already appeared in *Chambers's Nursery Rhymes of Scotland*, as written down by the genial and talented author from Mrs. Begg's recital. It was also published many years ago as a Christmas story for children, with a series of excellent illustrations by "J. B.," a then youthful artist, son of Mrs. Hugh Blackburn; As Burns's authorship has never been disputed, and no trace of the story has been found outside the Burns family circle, it may now be safely assumed that Mrs. Begg was correct in her conviction. Indeed, the very phraseo-

logy of the story seems of itself to indicate its authorship.

### MARRIAGE OF ROBIN REDBREAST AND JENNY WREN.

There was an auld gray Poussie Baudrons, and she gaed awa' down by a water side, and there she saw a wee Robin Redbreast happin' on a brier ; and Poussie Baudrons says, "Where's tu gaun, wee Robin ?" And wee Robin says, "I'm gaun awa' to the king to sing him a sang this guid Yule morning." And Poussie Baudrons says, "Come here, wee Robin, and I'll let you see a bonny white ring round my neck." But wee Robin says, "Na, na ! gray Poussie Baudrons ; na, na ! Ye worry't the wee mousie, but ye'se no worry me." So wee Robin flew awa' till he came to a fail fauld-dike, and there he saw a gray greedy gled sitting. And the gray greedy gled says, "Where's tu gaun, wee Robin ?" And wee Robin says, "I'm gaun awa' to the king to sing him a sang this guid Yule morning." And gray greedy gled says, "Come here, wee Robin, and I'll let ye see a bonny feather in my

wing." But wee Robin says, "Na, na! gray greedy gled; na, na! Ye pookit a' the wee lintie, but ye'se no pook me." So wee Robin flew awa' till he came to the cleuch o' a craig, and there he saw slee Tod Lowrie sitting. And slee Tod Lowrie says, "Where's tu gaun, wee Robin?" And wee Robin says, "I'm gaun awa' to the king to sing him a sang this guid Yule morning." And slee Tod Lowrie says, "Come here, wee Robin, and I'll let ye see a bonny spot on the tap o' my tail." But wee Robin says, "Na, na! slee Tod Lowrie; na, na! Ye worry't the wee lammie, but ye'se no worry me." So wee Robin flew awa' till he came to a bonny burnside, and there he saw a wee callant sitting. And the wee callant says, "Where tu gaun, wee Robin?" And wee Robin says, "I'm gaun awa' to the king to sing him a sang this guid Yule morning." And the wee callant says, "Come here, wee Robin, and I'll gie ye a wheen grand moolins out o' my pooch." But wee Robin says, "Na, na! wee callant; na, na! Ye speldert the gowdspink, but ye'se no spelder me." So wee Robin flew awa' till he came to the king, and there he sat on a winnock sole and sang the king a bonny sang. And the king says to the queen,

“What’ll we gie to wee Robin for singing us this bonny sang?” And the queen says to the king, “I think we’ll gie him the wee wran to be his wife.” So wee Robin and the wee wran were married, and the king and the queen and a’ the court danced at the waddin’; syne he flew awa’ hame to his ain water side and happit on a brier.

With all her love for children, her treatment of them never failed to be characterised by that sound, practical common sense and discrimination which she invariably exhibited in other affairs of life, and her fondness was never allowed to degenerate into anything like weak or blinded indulgence. On the contrary, she was a strict disciplinarian, and on suitable occasions exercised her motherly and grandmotherly authority with all that rigidity of

principle and high appreciation of filial obedience which formed so striking and prominent a feature in the character of her worthy father. One instance of her practical views in regard to the chastisement of very young children will suffice. When her son Robert's young wife had her first child, the old lady, as early as possible, paid a lengthened visit to her son's house for the purpose of making the acquaintance of the highly important "little stranger," and, as usual on such interesting occasions, the bathing of the baby formed the great event of the day in the eyes of the fond mother and not less fond grandmother. One morning, while engaged in this interesting occupation, the conversation natur-



ally turned to the punishment of young children, the young mother expressing her wonder how any mother could ever have the heart to administer chastisement for the *first* time to her child ; for her part, she felt as if she could never succeed in convincing herself that the proper time had really arrived for such treatment. "Oh, my dear," said the practical old lady, "you need be under no difficulty as to that. If it's really needed, ye canna err in beginning as soon as the bottom's as braid's your loof." Like many strict but judicious disciplinarians, she seldom required in her management of young children to carry her practical views beyond mere words of reproof. These were always

few and well chosen, and they were generally given with a force and effect which at once arrested attention and enforced obedience. Not uncommonly, too, they were conveyed in a quaint and humorous form of expression, which to children proved irresistible. One day, coming suddenly on a scene of childish riot and disorder, she said, with an emphasis which produced immediate quietness, "Bairns! bairns! this will never do. I declare it wad tak' a sow with a drawn sword to keep order amang ye." Her intercourse with children was always conducted in the truest sympathy and cordiality, and their little weaknesses and follies were rebuked or checked in the kindest

spirit of humorous banter and affectionate ridicule. One day when she was about to go to Edinburgh, her younger children were eagerly suggesting various trifles which they wished her to bring to them from "the toun." Her son Robert, then a young stripling, seriously impressed with the importance of a budding beard, maintained a dignified, not to say contemptuous, silence amid the clamours of his more juvenile brothers and sisters; and at length his mother turned to him with the enquiry, "Is there nothing I can bring for you?" "Well, mother," said the blushing lad hesitatingly, "if you are near a good cutler's shop, you might buy me a razor." "A razor!" said his

mother in astonished accents ; “ deed, Robert, my dear, I think I’d better buy you the beard first.”

The incidents of the last twenty-five years of Mrs. Begg’s life may be briefly told. Owing to her eldest son’s resignation of his appointment at Ormiston in the year 1832, Mrs. Begg, who till then had kept house for him in the schoolhouse there, found it necessary to look elsewhere for a home, and she accordingly took up her abode with her two daughters, Agnes and Isabella, who had a few years previously established themselves as dressmakers in the neighbouring village of Tranent. Here the undaunted mother, and her two daughters, continued to maintain

themselves by their own unaided industry until the year 1842, when, by the efforts of Lord Houghton (then Mr. Monkton Milnes), Thomas Carlyle, Dr. Robert Chambers, and others, a fund was provided by the admirers of Burns, which, with the addition of a pension granted by the Queen at the solicitation of Lady Peel, secured for Mrs. Begg an income sufficient to provide for the comfort of her old age. Carlyle's letter to Mrs. Begg, dated 7th June, 1842, announcing the successful issue of their efforts, is highly characteristic of the writer, and evinces the heartiness with which he had espoused the claims of Burns's sister to public recognition. "Properly, however," he

says, "you do not owe this to anybody but to your own illustrious brother, whose noble life, wasted tragically away, pleads now aloud to men of every rank and place for some humanity to his last surviving sister. May God grant you all good of this gift and make it really useful to you ! You need not answer this letter ; it is a mere luxury that I give myself in writing it."

To a person of Mrs. Begg's frugal and practical character, the income now secured to her must have been a ground for deep thankfulness and unalloyed satisfaction. It raised her at once above the sordid cares and anxieties which for nearly thirty years had so incessantly harassed her, and galled that

proud independence of spirit which she, in common with the poet, had inherited from their sturdy, upright father. In the following year a still further improvement took place in her worldly comfort, owing to her having been accorded the use for her lifetime of a picturesque cottage near the banks of the Doon, and immediately adjoining the public road leading from Ayr to the poet's monument. This concession was the result of a suggestion by Dr. William Chambers to his brother Robert, he having found, on the occasion of a visit he had paid to Ayrshire in 1842, "that there was a great wish to have Mrs. Begg planted somewhere about the spot of her brother's nati-

vity." Accordingly, at Whitsunday, 1843, Mrs. Begg removed from Tranent, and along with her two daughters returned to Ayrshire, the county of her nativity, after an absence of upwards of half a century.

This change of abode, although decidedly preferable in every way, was not made without some little feeling of natural regret, for Mrs. Begg had, during her residence at Ormiston and Tranent, gathered around her many attached friends, who warmly esteemed and respected her on account of her many admirable qualities, and the dignity and respectability with which she had hitherto maintained herself by her honourable industry. The kindly



interest she excited among her friends at Ormiston and Tranent was purely the result of her own personal merit; for so averse was she to parade her relationship to the poet that few even of Burns's admirers in that immediate neighbourhood knew until she had removed to Ayrshire that they had for so many years had a sister of Burns resident among them. Indeed, it is remarked that "one gentleman who had dealt with Mrs. Begg and her family for twenty years, never knew of the relationship until the family removed to Ayr, although he was an enthusiast about everything relating to the Scottish poet."

Little more than a year after she had

established herself in her new abode at Ayr, she was called upon to take part in the great festival of 6th August, 1844, organised for the purpose of according to the sons of Burns a national welcome to the "Banks of the Doon." Robert, the eldest son of the poet, had some time before retired from the Government appointment he held, and had located himself in Dumfries; while his two younger brothers, Colonel William Nicol Burns and Major James Glencairn Burns, had also recently returned to their native country after lengthened military service in India. The demonstration excited an amount of interest and enthusiasm far exceeding the most sanguine expectations of

its promoters. Crowds of the poet's enthusiastic admirers, not only from all parts of Scotland, but even from England and Ireland, flocked to the "auld clay biggin'" to do homage to his genius, until, as stated in the newspapers of the day, the vast concourse of people could not be estimated at less than 80,000. Along with the sons of the poet, Mrs. Begg was assigned a prominent place in the ceremonial of the day. They occupied conspicuous positions on a platform erected for the purpose close to the now famous "Auld Brig o' Doon," and the vast procession, nearly a mile in length, passed in front of this platform on its way from Burns's cottage to the pavilion in which the festival was to be

held. It must have been a proud and gratifying occasion to the sons of Burns ; and who can doubt that it was equally, if not even more so, to his now aged sister ? As she stood there at the side of her nephews, surrounded by the Earl of Eglinton, the chairman on the occasion, Professor Wilson ( " Christopher North " ), the croupier, and many other noble and distinguished men and women from all parts of the United Kingdom and the sister isle ; and as she watched the interminable procession slowly file past, each individual doing homage to her brother's memory by reverently uncovering before his sons, she must have had many a deep and heart-swelling reflection. It is even

probable that she may have been able to regard the stirring spectacle before her as only the practical fulfilment of the bright anticipation which had dawned upon her under the family roof-tree at Mossgiel nearly sixty years previously.

From the time of her removal to Ayr, Mrs. Begg's life became one of well-earned ease and peace and comfort; and in the companionship of her two faithful and devoted daughters, Agnes and Isabella, the last fifteen years of her life were brightened by much domestic happiness and by the pleasing society of many very warm and interested friends in the locality. By the later, as well as by the numerous

visitors from a distance, whom admiration for Burns attracted to Ayr, her cottage was much frequented. Her manner to all was invariably courteous, dignified, and natural; while her shrewd, practical observations on literary subjects, as well as on the current topics of the day, and the sagacity and cultivated taste which she invariably displayed, never failed to convey a very favourable and lasting impression. Under her lowly cottage roof she received visitors of widely differing grades, including many of the first literary men and women of the day, and not infrequently the conversations which took place within her comfortable little parlour were as sparkling and

bright as those which fancy associates with the brilliant *salons* of the titled leaders of society. Her recollections of the poet were vivid and distinct, although these were limited almost exclusively to the years of her youth, when Burns was still resident under the parental roof at Lochlea and Mossgiel. After Burns took up his abode at Ellisland in 1788, the meetings between the brother and sister were of course rare and exceptional, and of the incidents of the later years of the poet's career she had little personal knowledge beyond what she obtained from the information of others.

With her sister-in-law, Jean Armour, she maintained a warm and sincere

friendship from the days of their early association at Mauchline down to the date of Mrs. Burns's death in 1834 ; but, as is too often the case in Scotch families, especially in those days of costly postage, the intercourse never seems to have extended to anything like regular epistolary correspondence either between Mrs. Begg and her brother or between the sisters-in-law. Indeed, so far as regards the poet, it would almost appear that, however warmly he and his youngest sister were attached to each other, she never received a single letter from him during her whole life. Notwithstanding this lack of direct personal intercourse, she seems to have followed her brother's



career after he left Mossgiel with all that keen interest and attention which deeply-rooted affection alone can give, and her knowledge of the varied incidents of his life and of the different persons whom he has immortalised in his works was remarkably full, minute, and reliable, and, as a matter of course, profoundly interesting. She never spoke of her brother save with that intense love and admiration which he was so well fitted to inspire, and although his failings were rarely alluded to, yet even these, when necessarily introduced, were spoken of by her with that candour, common sense, and good taste, which one would naturally expect from a pure-minded, intelligent woman

of the world, and yet at the same time with all the large-hearted charitableness of a truly loving and considerate nature. In particular, she warmly resented the exaggerated accounts of the poet's irregularities at Dumfries, which were given to the world by some of his biographers a few years after his death. This feeling was keenly shared not only by her brother Gilbert, but also by the poet's loving and devoted wife, "Bonnie Jean;" and Mrs. Begg, when this painful subject was under discussion, never failed to quote an assurance which Mrs. Burns had solemnly and emphatically made to her "that Burns never indulged unless when he was in social and congenial company, and that

during the whole time they were living in Dumfries, although often out at convivial meetings till a late hour, he never on one single occasion, however late he might be of coming home, failed in a nightly custom he invariably observed before coming to bed of going into the room where his children slept and satisfying himself that they were all comfortably 'tucked in and sleeping soundly.' "

Mrs. Burns cherished a true sisterly affection for Mrs. Begg, and that feeling was fully reciprocated on Mrs. Begg's part. She entertained a profound admiration for Mrs. Burns's noble hearted devotion to her husband, evinced in her unparalleled magnani-

mity in receiving into her own family, and nursing and rearing as a daughter of her own, "Betty Burns," the offspring of her husband's conjugal infidelity. Of the true nobility and thoroughness of that act of wifely self-abnegation it is fitting that we should leave the foster-daughter herself to speak, and fortunately we can here introduce the following quotation from an interesting letter, dated 1st December, 1843, addressed by her to Mrs. Begg, nearly ten years after Mrs. Burns's death. By that time "Betty" was settled in life as a married woman, and the mother of a well-doing and thriving family. In course of communicating, in all the pride of a

mother's heart, the names and ages of her eight children, she interpolates the following grateful tribute to Mrs. Burns :—

“The names of the last two children (Sarah Burns and James Burns) was all that Mrs. Burns did exact from me as an acknowledgment of her unwearied kindness to me. God was kind to her, my dear aunt, in giving her plenty, but she did not hide it in a hedge. She willingly shared it with the poor and needy. The last letter I had from her was in July, 1833, with £2 in it to buy a frock for my youngest child, then about a month old. The more I contemplate that excellent woman's character the more I admire it. There was something good and charitable about her, surpassing all women I ever yet met with. She was indeed a true friend and the best of mothers to me, and I was often led to think that all friendship for me in the family had gone with her, but I am glad to find it otherwise.”

With her nephews, the three sons of the poet, Mrs. Begg maintained a

constant and affectionate intercourse, although naturally her chief correspondence was with Robert, the eldest son, owing to his younger brothers, William and James, having been so long absent in India. After their return to this country they were frequent visitors at the cottage at Belleisle, and they never varied in the affection and respect with which they regarded their aunt. She, on her part, was warmly interested in their welfare, for she had known them from their boyhood, when they were in the habit of spending part of their autumn school "vacation" at Dinning Farm, while she and her husband were resident there in the early years of her wedded life.

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led to a correspondence between Mrs. Begg and her brother's genial biographer, which extended over a period of nearly two years. The letters are numerous and of much interest, although, owing to the infirmity of her extreme age, she was obliged to avail herself of the services of her youngest daughter, Isabella, as her amanuensis in conducting her part of the correspondence. There is no doubt that the information thus derived tended very much to impart to Dr. Chambers's life of the poet that realistic effect which renders it so superior to all others ; and so very highly did the generous-hearted biographer value the assistance of his aged collaborateur, that he in the most



liberal manner devoted the whole profits of his edition (£300) towards providing for the future independence of her two daughters, thus "removing from her mind its last load of care," as Mrs. Begg emphatically puts it in her letter to Dr. Chambers expressing her gratitude for his noble and unlooked-for generosity. To Dr. Chambers himself the successful issue of his disinterested scheme was a deep and genuine gratification. In his letter to Mrs. Begg he says : "I have not been so happy about anything for a long time as thus finding myself able and willing to become the medium through which the people of Scotland may

make a kind of final atonement to the shade of their great national poet."

The closing years of Mrs. Begg's life were thus in striking contrast to the earlier years of her widowhood, and on Saturday, 4th December, 1858, she, in the eighty-eighth year of her age, calmly sank to her final repose in the very midst of the enthusiastic preparations which were then being made all over the country for the celebration of the centenary of the birth of her gifted brother. The final scene is feelingly and truthfully depicted by the contemporary writer from whom quotations have already been more than once introduced into this Memoir:

“Her last illness, if such it could be called, came upon her on Tuesday night in the form of a slight cold, caught probably in the garden on the preceding day, when she had been out longer than usual and felt particularly well. Although she was a little restless and feverish on Tuesday night, there was nothing to excite apprehension, and the day before her death she had, to appearance, completely recovered. Once only did her faculties seem for a short time to waver, when on Wednesday she asked her daughter the date of the poet's birthday, and being answered ‘25th January,’ she replied, ‘Well, I thought so; but was not sure.’ It was evident from this that the coming celebration must have deeply moved, perhaps to some extent excited, her. On Saturday morning about three o'clock, however, a change seemed to come over her, and it was with anxiety that her daughters observed she could only make dumb signs of recognition. In this condition she continued for about five hours, and then, with two deep-drawn sighs, her spirit gently took its flight, and lightly as a child she fell asleep.”

In the presence of many sorrowing

friends her remains were, by the loving hands of her sons, John and Robert, and six of her grandsons, reverently deposited in the grave in Old Alloway kirkyard, where already repose the ashes of her father, William Burness, and where, after a lengthened separation of upwards of three-quarters of a century, the worthy old father and his youngest and favourite child were at last reunited for ever.

Besides her two daughters, Agnes and Isabella, who faithfully and devotedly ministered to their mother's comfort to the last, she was survived by four of her sons—William, John, Robert, and Gilbert. William, on leaving Ormiston, had settled in

Canada, first as a teacher, and latterly as assistant to a medical practitioner there, and he died on 15th May, 1864, much esteemed and regretted by every one who knew him. John died on 11th April, 1867, at Kilmarnock, where he had ultimately settled; and Gilbert, after long service in the Royal Navy, from which he retired as a petty officer with a pension, died at Pollokshaws in January, 1885, the holder of medals for military service at Navarino and in the Crimean campaign. Robert, her third son, and most regular correspondent, continued to discharge his laborious and important duties as schoolmaster of the parish of Kinross for upwards of half a century, and on

25th July, 1876, he died in the school-house there in the eightieth year of his age. The painstaking zeal and unvarying fidelity and integrity which characterised his whole life is truthfully described in the following chaste tribute to his memory, which was contributed to the public press by an anonymous correspondent at the time of his death :—

*“He taughte, but first he folwede it himselve.”\**

“ In blessed quiet, late at eventide  
Hath passed away from earthly work the soul  
Of him whom old and young rejoiced to  
honour.  
And rightly ; for his manly, noble life  
Of fourscore years was sacredly devoted  
With one intent—to bless his fellow-men.

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\* From Chancer's *Prologue to Canterbury Tales*.

In truest loyalty and faithfulness  
Were fulfilled the high and solemn duties  
Of the most sacred office justly his—  
The arming of men's minds for their life-long  
war ;

He sought to do this not by pedant's lore,  
But foremost taught how simply to be men ;  
Full in the front he led that upward path  
Which he would lovingly have others tread.  
No more with us is seen his reverend form,  
Yet he invisibly will never cease  
To teach, as ever teach the holy dead  
In voiceless mighty teachings, the great lesson  
To consecrate life's work not to the seen,  
For nobleness of soul, such as was his,  
Hath o'er our spirits an immortal sway."

Mrs. Begg's two daughters, Agnes and Isabella, survived their mother several years—Agnes dying on 1st May, 1883, aged eighty-three, and Isabella on 27th December, 1886, aged eighty. Both of them lived out their

exemplary lives under the roof which had sheltered their mother's venerable head at the close of her long, weary experience of suffering and toil, and the death of Isabella—the youngest member and solitary survivor of the whole family—severed the last link which united the descendants of William Burness with the district of the poet's nativity.

THE END.



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